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Social cohesion and community justice: the restorative city potential of Pécs

Introduction

Urban communities in the 21st century are facing increasingly complex challenges: growing social inequalities, rapid urbanisation and weakening community cohesion are problems that are becoming increasingly difficult to address through traditional law enforcement and judicial means¹. In response to these trends, the concept of restorative cities has emerged, applying the principles of restorative justice to the management of urban life. Restorative cities aim not only to sanction crime, but also to restore community relations, build social trust and resolve conflicts in a peaceful, community-based way². The restorative approach argues that conflicts and crimes are not isolated legal problems, but violations of the community's interest that need to be restored for sustainable peace³.

The concept of restorative cities offers a new approach to urban safety and crime prevention. Traditional criminal justice systems often deal with crime in a reactive way, but restorative approaches focus on preventing conflict and crime by strengthening community relations⁴. Restorative

¹ World Cities Report 2020: The Value of Sustainable Urbanization. United Nations Human Settlements Programme. Available at: <https://unhabitat.org/wcr/> Accessed 08.12.2025

² Matczak, A. (2021): What is a restorative city? (Czym jest miasto sprawiedliwości naprawczej?), Archiwum Kryminologii (Archives of Criminology), Vol. XLIII/2 (2021) p. 402

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7420/AK2021.19>

³ Zehr, H. J. (2002): The little book of restorative justice. Good Books, p. 8

⁴ Braithwaite, J. (2002): Restorative justice and responsive regulation. Oxford University Press, p. 11

justice argues that state sanctioning is not enough to deal with the consequences of crime; the involvement of the parties involved (victims, offenders and communities) is key to real healing and reconciliation⁵. Restorative cities apply this philosophy to the urban space as a whole: all actors, be they schools, police, community centres or municipalities, actively contribute to the development of a restorative culture. In restorative cities, crime prevention is not an exclusive police task but a complex community strategy. Peaceful conflict management, promoting social justice and encouraging community participation all contribute to a safer urban environment⁶.

The paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the role of restorative cities in crime prevention, highlighting difficulties and concerns and describing international good practice. In addition to a comprehensive analysis, the authors have undertaken to explore the possibilities for adapting restorative cities at home. The study concludes by examining the architectural and environmental infrastructure, the institutional network and interpersonal relations, the cultural and educational conditions of the place of residence, and by showing that the city of Pécs is suitable for the introduction and application of the restorative urban concept.

The concept of the restorative city

The challenges facing cities in the 21st century – rising social inequalities, accelerating urbanisation and weakening community cohesion – have called for new types of approaches to urban planning and crime prevention. Traditional repressive instruments such as law enforcement and criminal justice are increasingly unable to deal effectively with conflicts in urban communities. In response to this problem, the concept of restorative cities has emerged⁷.

⁵ Zehr, H. J. (2002): i.m. p. 14

⁶ Matczak, A. (2021): i.m. p. 413

⁷ Matczak, A. (2021): i.m. p. 408

A restorative city is not just a legal or administrative reform, but a new social approach: it takes conflict as the property of the community and seeks to resolve it through the active participation of the community⁸. The aim of a restorative city is not to sanction crime per se, but to restore relationships, rebuild trust and actively involve stakeholders in addressing problems. Children play a key role, as the protection and support of young people is a cornerstone of the restorative city model, which has a direct impact on the success of long-term crime prevention strategies.

According to the restorative approach, crime and other conflicts are not in fact disputes between the state and the offender, but rather breakdowns in relationships between individuals and communities that need to be restored⁹.

The restorative city has three major goals:

- Strengthening social cohesion: phenomena of isolation, anonymous relationships and alienation are common in urban communities. The aim of the restorative city is to replace these with relationships based on cooperation, mutual respect and shared responsibility¹⁰. Strengthening community participation and social relations will reduce the risk of crime and increase the sense of security in the long term.
- Restorative conflict management: in restorative cities, conflict management is based on restorative justice principles. The focus is not

⁸ Christie, N. (1977): Conflicts as property. British Journal of Criminology, Vol. 17, No. 1 (January), pp. 1-2

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjc.a046783>

⁹ Zehr, H. J. (2002): i.m. pp. 7-15

¹⁰ Matczak, A. (2021): i.m. p. 412

on punishment, but on dialogue, accountability, reconciliation between victims and defendants, and restoration of harm¹¹. Community mediation programmes¹², restorative conferences and community justice forums are all part of this approach.

- Strengthening community participation: the restorative city aims to ensure that citizens are not just passive beneficiaries of public services, but also active shapers of community life in the city. This participation is not limited to political voting but also extends to conflict management, urban planning and community decision-making¹³.

It is important to understand that the restorative city does not aim to replace criminal justice altogether, but to complement it with a more human, community-centred dimension. The aim is not to replace justice with community, but to enhance individual and collective sense of responsibility, reduce escalation of conflict and promote healing in the community. A restorative approach can also make a significant contribution to addressing school violence¹⁴. The restorative city concept is that all urban spaces and institutions, from schools to community centres, can play a part in creating a restorative culture, contributing to a more just and inclusive urban life¹⁵.

¹¹ Braithwaite, J. (2002): i.m. p. 4

¹² Bérces, V. (2009): A resztoratív igazságszolgáltatási koncepció érvényesülésének lehetőségei büntetőügyekben – különös tekintettel a mediációra és annak hazai szabályozására. [The possibilities for applying the concept of restorative justice in criminal cases – with particular regard to mediation and its regulation in Hungary], Iustum Aequum Salutare, 2009/3., p. 141

¹³ Vasilescu, C. (2023): Building the restorative city: what goals and processes? The International Journal of Restorative Justice, Vol. 6. No. 1. p. 121

¹⁴ Pongrácz, I. (2025): Resztoratív eszközökkel az iskolai online kortárs zaklatás ellen [Restorative tools against online bullying in schools], Jura, 2025/1., p. 191

¹⁵ Matczak, A. (2021): i.m. p. 420

Achieving the goals outlined above has a direct impact on crime prevention. Creating social cohesion has an impact on residents' sense of security. This can lead to results in terms of preventing victimisation. And a restorative approach to conflict management and strengthening community participation will have an impact on preventing and deterring offending. And the concept's urban planning and policing model aims to prevent crime (situational prevention).

The concept of the restorative city also assigns means to achieve these objectives, which are:

- technical tools and equipment to increase the sense of security,
- architectural and transport solutions based on a restorative approach,
- restorative conflict management methods,
- micro- and macro-level cooperation.

Urban design principles and aspects

Restorative environments typically take the form of designed structures such as water surfaces, green spaces, quiet noise levels, visual complexity and escape from urban bustle¹⁶. However, these characteristics are not found exclusively in natural environments: urban parks, quiet streets, community gardens, and certain cultural and artistic spaces can also have a restorative¹⁷ effect.

¹⁶ Hartig, T. – Evans G. W. – Jamner, L. D. - Davis, D. S. – Gärling, T. (2003): Tracking restoration in natural and urban field settings. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (June) p. 113

Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944\(02\)00109-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0272-4944(02)00109-3)

¹⁷ Stigsdotter, U. K. – Corazon, S. S. – Sidenius, U. – Refshauge, A. D. – Grahn, P. (2017): Forest design for mental health promotion - Using perceived sensory dimensions to elicit restorative responses. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 2017/160., p. 13

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.11.012>

The concept of the restorative city thus goes beyond traditional urban planning and combines crime prevention with environmental psychology and sustainable urban development in an interdisciplinary way. In a restorative city, design not only focuses on functionality and aesthetics, but also actively promotes the well-being of its inhabitants, particularly in the dimensions of mental and emotional health¹⁸. The increasing stress levels of urban populations and the aftermath of the pandemic have made the importance of public spaces that allow for retreat, relaxation and social connection particularly valuable.

A restorative city is therefore not just a physical space, but also a set of values and attitudes that put urban quality of life at its core. Pedestrian and wheelchair-friendly transport systems, the development of community spaces, the enhancement of biodiversity, and social inclusion and participation are all cornerstones of the restorative city.

The urban design principles of restorative cities are thus based on a restorative justice philosophy: the organisation of space is not only aimed at preventing crime, but also at promoting community cohesion, social participation and justice. Restorative urban planning seeks to create an environment that encourages dialogue, community cooperation and peaceful conflict resolution.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) theorises that the physical design of the environment can influence the incidence of crime¹⁹. Restorative cities apply this principle by seeking not only to prevent crime, but also to foster community presence, transparency and a sense of responsibility.

¹⁸ Roe, J. & McCay, L. (2021): Restorative Cities: Urban Design for Mental Health and Wellbeing. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts. p. 113

¹⁹ Cozens, P. M. (2010): Crime prevention through environmental design. In Fisher, B. S. - Lab, S. P. (eds.), Encyclopedia of Victimology and Crime Prevention, SAGE Publications, p. 212

The principles are:

1. Natural observability.
2. Natural surveillance.
3. Territorial reinforcement.
4. Open, inclusive community spaces.
5. Child-friendly urban design.

Although the idea of restorative cities is gaining increasing attention worldwide, there are many difficulties and constraints in putting it into practice. Integrating restorative principles into urban design poses not only technical or financial challenges, but also deeper social, cultural and institutional challenges:

1. Urbanisation pressures.
2. Urban pressures.
3. Political and institutional barriers.
4. Difficulties in ensuring community participation.
5. Lack of resources.
6. Cultural barriers.
7. Ensuring special protection for children.

The National Crime Prevention Strategy and the Public Safety and Crime Prevention Concept of the City of Pécs

In the foregoing, we wanted to provide a comprehensive overview of the restorative urban concept and its practical applicability. Based on the criteria of a comprehensive analysis, we would like to develop our arguments towards the adoption of good practice. As a local patriot, it was obvious to look at our city, Pécs, from this perspective. Our research was helped by the fact that as local residents we are familiar with the city's endowments and institutional network. However, in addition to the micro-environment,

it is also important to examine the supporting background of the normative environment in order to replicate the concept that has been successful abroad. At the end of 2023, the previous crime prevention strategy (hereinafter referred to as NBS) that had determined the direction and priorities of crime prevention in Hungary for the past 10 years expired²⁰. The NBS has been replaced by a new Crime Prevention Strategy, which combines lessons learned, criminological research and international practice (hereinafter referred to as the Strategy)²¹. This Strategy was designed to create synergies between the measures aimed at implementing crime prevention activities, thus guaranteeing the efficiency and effectiveness of crime prevention work. It also provides a framework for the broadest possible coordination of the resources of the state, municipalities and other actors involved in crime prevention and for the efficient use of resources. Analysis and interpretation of the Strategy suggests that the national legal framework provides the basis for the introduction of the concept of the restorative city, by setting out its objectives and listing the measures necessary to achieve them (particularly in the field of architectural crime prevention).

The normative links identified in the Strategy are:

- It defines community prevention and situational (crime prevention) and victim-centred prevention as crime prevention orientations. In the area of community prevention, strengthening local governance (urban planning) and community building and development programmes (Neighbours for Neighbours) build on a restorative approach. Situational and victim-centred prevention focuses on comprehensive environmental and safety planning.

²⁰ See Government Decision 1744/2013 (X. 17.) on the National Crime Prevention Strategy (2013-2023)

²¹ See Government Decision No. 1291/2023 (19 July 2013) on the National Crime Prevention Strategy (2024-2034) and the National Crime Prevention Strategy Action Plan 2024-2025

- Environmental development is a key area of intervention, with the aim of reducing crime incidents, building on the background of community and situational prevention. The underlying idea of architectural crime prevention is that crime incidents can be reduced by proper design of the built environment and by increasing community control. The basic principles of architectural crime prevention are natural surveillance, natural regulation of entitlement, marking of ownership, maintenance and upkeep, and strengthening social cohesion.
- The Action Plan attached to these objectives sets out practical options and programmes that are also compatible with the philosophy of the restorative urban concept. These include, in particular, improving the built environment (1.1), continuing peer support programmes (2.1.2), encouraging the development of a public safety and crime prevention strategy (3.3) and supporting crime prevention projects.

In 2024, the City of Pécs adopted its 10-year Concept for Public Safety and Crime Prevention (hereinafter referred to as the Concept). In its introduction, the Concept, in addition to the Local Government Act and the European Charter of Local Self-Government, explicitly refers to the Strategy and to the need to rethink the tasks, analyse and forecast the expected processes and make recommendations for the necessary actions in order to improve public safety and to join forces against crime. The aim of the Concept is to define strategic objectives and priorities on the basis of a concrete analysis of the situation and to provide an appropriate framework for broad cooperation and the effective implementation of common tasks.

Based on the data of the past years, the Concept sets out the following four objectives for the next 10 years:

- a change in approach to public safety (the introduction of a community safety management approach and methodology);

- reduction of crime (both quantitative and qualitative);
- policing public spaces and roads;
- meeting the public's expectations of security (launching and managing programmes and projects that have a positive impact on citizens' subjective perception of security).

The concrete measures proposed for the objectives are linked to the possibility of becoming a restorative city in several respects, even though the document does not explicitly use this concept:

1. Social cooperation and safety management: the Concept emphasises public safety as a shared social responsibility. Security is not the exclusive responsibility of the police or state agencies, but can be ensured through the participation of individuals, communities and civil society organisations - a basic principle of restorative justice.
2. Preventing re-offending: the Concept highlights the importance of preventing re-offending, for example through aftercare, patronage and support for family members. This is a practical application of restorative principles (reintegration, responsibility, community healing).
3. Community crime prevention and awareness-raising: the Concept emphasises community safety management, neighbourhood cooperation, the role of the neighbourhood watch and the involvement of the public. This is fully in line with the restorative city approach, where local communities are active players in crime prevention and conflict management.
4. Prevention of child and juvenile delinquency: the problems arising from the criminogenic environment of juveniles are closely linked to the restorative city approach. The Concept specifically focuses on strengthening child protection, school programmes, prevention, drug prevention and social intervention.

5. Victim support and mediation: the Concept mentions the institution of mediation and the development of a victim support system, which is also an essential element of restorative justice.

Thus, although the term restorative city is not used in the Concept, many elements of it are in harmony with this idea. Community-based crime prevention, the reintegration of offenders, social responsibility and victim support can all be foundations for building a restorative city model.

Instead of a conclusion: arguments in favour of Pécs becoming a restorative city

The analysis of the Strategy and the Concept clearly shows that Pécs is well placed to become the 12th European city to be awarded the title of restorative city. This is supported by 12 factors:

1. The city has always been a symbol of peace, coexistence and cultural diversity, from the Roman Sopianae to the medieval bishopric to the urban communities of the Turkish era. These values resonate well with the principles of restorative justice, such as dialogue, community participation and building on historical lessons.
2. University City: theory meets practice, nations and generations live together. The University of Pécs is one of Hungary's largest and most colourful higher education institutions. The interdisciplinary knowledge base of the University allows a restorative approach to meet theoretical grounding, research and innovative programmes. In addition, the University's international student community and the presence of young people contribute to an inclusive, open and learning urban climate.
3. Population: Pécs' population of around 135-140,000 is the ideal size for a restorative city: large enough to accommodate a wide range of

social strata, challenges and services, but small enough for community relations, networking and informal solutions to work effectively.

4. This culture of cooperation provides an excellent basis for developing a broad social base for introducing and sustaining restorative approaches.
5. Partnering and professional cooperation between the criminal justice and child protection sectors: there are already several examples of inter-professional cooperation between child protection professionals and the justice system in Pécs. For example, good practices in child hearings or active links between family support services and the police and courts. This synergy is essential for the development of a restorative city.
6. This existing knowledge base is an excellent basis for expanding the restorative urban model.
7. The built environment and the natural environment allow for community connectivity: the structure of the city (historic city centre, community spaces, green spaces, connections between neighbourhoods) facilitates physical and social community building. The Tettye, the Mecsek slope or the Zsolnay Quarter are places that can be catalysts for community programmes, shared experiences and dialogue.
8. The highest level of justice in rural areas: Pécs has a court of justice, a court of law, an administrative and labour court, a district court (and at the same time prosecutor's offices, a police headquarters and a police headquarters), and a highly qualified legal profession (Bar Association, Faculty of Law).
9. This body can be a strategic partner in the concept of the restorative city, where a preventive, community and restorative approach can be emphasised rather than a targeted approach.

10. Pécs Public Safety and Crime Prevention Concept: as detailed above, Pécs has a separate concept for public safety and crime prevention which can provide a framework for the integration of restorative elements. This will not only allow new programmes to be launched, but also to adapt existing structures with a restorative approach.
11. Reaching tourists and international partners will enhance the international prestige of the city and could become a model initiative.
12. This institution could be a central pillar of the city's restorative structure, with model cooperation and sharing of experience.

Pécs' characteristics, its institutions, professional networks and community traditions all point in one direction: the city could be an ideal setting for the implementation of the restorative urban model. Existing structures can be further developed and theoretical knowledge can be combined with practical experience to make Pécs Hungary's first – and one of Europe's models – restorative cities.²²

²² The study was supported by the University of Pécs University of Pécs grant 001_2025_PTE_RK/5.